

2. Syria

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NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20506

May 5, 1977

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MEMORANDUM FOR:

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CIA Headquarters  
Room 6G05  
Langley, Virginia

Approved for Release  
by the Central Intelligence Agency  
Date: NOV 13, 2013

AR-70-14  
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SUBJECT: Your Analysis on Syria

I found your study on Syria to be quite useful and was pleased to see that the NID carried much of it today. I do have one specific question that perhaps you could answer. You say that Asad "is prepared to accept the demilitarization of the Golan Heights to satisfy Israel's security needs." Khaddam did not take that line with us, nor did [redacted] hear anything like that when he was recently in Damascus. I would very much like further documentation of your assertion.

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If you have any further thoughts on Syrian attitudes toward a Palestinian state or a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation, I would also welcome them. Khaddam took the line that the Palestinians should have their own state, but that Syria would not object to a freely decided link with Jordan. Other reports from some of your sources seem to suggest that Asad is sharply opposed to the idea of an independent Palestinian state. What is your best judgment?

State Dept. review completed page 2

W.B.2.

William B. Quandt  
NSC Staff

NLC Review Completed  
page 2

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MORI C03370063 pg 2

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AR 70-14

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Dr. Quandt:

After reviewing the substance of my enclosed draft I  
am acutely aware of its limited usefulness to you. Part of  
the problem, as you are well aware, [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] But there is  
also an inherent problem for the analyst in trying to antici-  
pate the needs of the policy maker and his immediate staff.

To better serve you and educate ourselves, we would appre-  
ciate any guidance or feedback--good or bad--you can give us  
on the memoranda we send you. I know you are probably sick  
and tired of receiving such requests, but from past experience  
I can tell you that if an analyst is off base or headed in  
the wrong direction he would like to know about it! And the  
sooner the better. This message will self-destruct in five  
seconds.

Sincerely,

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[redacted]

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MEMORANDUM FOR: THE RECORD

196  
This attached memorandum was prepared by  
the Office of Regional and Political Analysis  
for the use of Dr. William Quandt. Any  
questions or comments (good or bad) may be  
addressed to the analyst,

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Date May 2, 1977

FORM 5-75 101 USE PREVIOUS EDITIONS

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195  
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May 2, 1977

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Carter-Asad Meeting: The Syrian Perspective

With the restoration of loose coordination among the key moderate Arab states, and the inauguration of a new administration in Washington, Syrian leaders are hopeful but guarded about the prospects for any new US peace initiative in the Middle East.

This mood of cautious optimism has been bolstered by the White House's opening moves. The decision to cancel the sale of concussion bombs to Israel, the high priority that is being given to reviving the Geneva peace conference, and President Carter's statements on final borders and the need for a Palestinian "homeland" have all made a good initial impression on Damascus.

The Syrians are intrigued by the change in style in Washington and clearly want to give the new administration's peace efforts every opportunity to succeed. To underscore this receptivity, the government and Baath party newspapers have been encouraged to give extensive and generally favorable coverage thus far to President Carter's actions and public remarks. While noting that a wide gap still exists between the US and the Arabs on some key issues, the Syrian press has credited the White House with seeking to develop broad domestic support for its unfolding peace strategy.

Skepticism Remains

The crucial, and as yet unanswered question for Damascus, however, is whether the new administration is prepared to take the risks necessary to push decisively for a comprehensive peace settlement. As a hedge against failure, the Syrians continue to criticize Israeli intransigence and express doubts about the ability of the US to act as a strong and impartial

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mediator given wide public and congressional sympathy for Israel. President Asad has personally cautioned against arousing undue optimism, or expecting rapid progress this year in negotiations.

These doubts, as well as lingering suspicions of US intentions, are likely to color Asad's approach to his meeting with President Carter in Geneva on May 9. Asad will want to test for himself how committed US leaders are to resolving the Arab-Israeli dispute. At the same time he will want to determine whether there is a better basis now for mutual understanding, trust and cooperation between Syria and the US.

The Syrians clearly would like to improve relations with Washington and have been moving cautiously in this direction for some time. They are particularly interested in attracting more investment capital and acquiring access to advanced US technology to help Syria overcome its economic backwardness.

Cooperation with the US in handling the Lebanese crisis has helped to dispel some deep-seated Syrian suspicion, but Asad probably is still concerned that the US will discount or ignore Syrian views, as he believes Secretary of State Kissinger did. Asad's differences with President Sadat over procedural matters, the timing of his trip to the Soviet Union, and his choice of meeting sites with President Carter all seem calculated in part at least as not-too-subtle reminders that Syria has a central and independent role to play if the US is serious about pursuing an overall peace settlement.

#### At Geneva

Asad will be flexible at Geneva, but he is more likely to solicit US ideas for moving negotiations forward at this point than to offer any suggestions of his own. Asad is a tougher, shrewder negotiator than Sadat in some ways, and he is also much more cautious.

Asad prefers to stake out a harder public line and stay one step behind Sadat in order to retain as much room for maneuver as possible. He shuns the role of initiator, preferring to let others offer their proposals first. He also places a lower premium on public diplomacy than Sadat; it is not his style.

-2-

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Thus, although he and Sadat have encouraged the Jordanians and Palestinians to reach an accommodation, Asad has carefully avoided endorsing Sadat's proposal for the establishment of a link between the West Bank and Jordan before the resumption of the Geneva talks as a means of finessing Israeli objections to dealing directly with the Palestine Liberation Organization. In part this simply reflects Asad's natural tendency to drive a hard bargain but it also reflects his belief that Syria holds few trump cards and must therefore play them with utmost care and attention to timing.

Asad seems certain to probe the US for its view on the shape of a final settlement. He will want to know in particular whether the US is willing to press Israel to return to its pre-June 1967 borders and what the US means by "minor modifications." He will also want to know what the US is prepared to do to bring the Israelis around to accepting a role for the PLO at Geneva if the Arabs in turn work out a common approach to the problem and gain PLO acceptance.

Asad does not want the Palestinian representation issue to scuttle the Geneva talks and is urging the PLO to accept his idea of going to Geneva as part of a single Arab delegation. But unless he gains some assurances that Syria stands a chance of regaining all of the Golan Heights, he is unlikely to press the PLO very hard to accept a compromise solution.

The US response on the issue of final borders will, therefore, be a critical factor in determining the degree of cooperation Syria is likely to lend US peace efforts in the crucial months ahead.

#### Asad vs. Sadat: Differences Persist

For the present, the Syrians seem genuinely pleased by the restoration of cooperation between Cairo and Damascus and determined to avoid any splits in Arab ranks that the Israelis could exploit. The second Sinai accord, however, was a bitter pill for Syrian leaders to swallow, and it has left a residue of distrust.

Asad has always differed with Sadat on basic strategy, believing that the Arabs should try to strike a balance between

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the US and the Soviet Union in order to expand their room for maneuver and maintain their credibility as a military threat to Israel. Although he shares Sadat's conviction that the US holds the key to a negotiated settlement, he believes Sadat has been unwise to tie himself so closely to the US and to sever his ties with Moscow.

Asad also feels frustrated playing second string to Sadat and is determined to increase his voice in the formulation of Arab strategy. His advocacy of a single Arab delegation and of functional rather than territorial committees at Geneva to discuss the shape of a final agreement appear in part to be tactical ploys to increase his leverage not only with the US but with his Arab allies as well.

The Egyptians and Saudis are probably counting on Saudi financial leverage to keep Asad in line. The Syrians have become increasingly dependent on Saudi largesse as a result of the high costs of their intervention in Lebanon. Syria's balance of payments is now near the zero mark--a situation the Saudis could quickly remedy, but have refused to do, presumably in order to keep Asad as tractable as possible.

#### Interest in Peace

Asad's desire for an end to hostilities is firmly rooted in practical considerations; his acceptance of Israel's right to exist is grudging at most. Like most Syrians, he probably believes that a great injustice has been done to the Arabs, and especially the Palestinians, by the implanting of an alien, aggressive, expansionist Jewish state in the Middle East. But Asad also seems to accept that Syria and Egypt cannot hope to defeat Israel militarily and that their repeated efforts to do so have brought the Arabs little but grief and dependence of one sort or another on outside powers.

Asad aspires to make Syria into a regional power, able to lay claim to its "rightful" place of leadership in the Arab world. To do so, Asad realizes Syria must develop economically and to do that he believes Syria must first make peace with Israel.

By peace, however, Asad means something quite different than the Israelis do. Ideally, he would prefer to sign an

-4-

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end of war agreement and forget that Israel exists. He does not regard diplomatic recognition or free trade--Israel's terms--as legitimate subjects for peace negotiations. But he is pragmatic enough, we believe, to understand he will have to accept some practical, implicit steps that lead in the direction of "normalization." He has already said he is prepared to accept the demilitarization of the Golan Heights to satisfy Israel's security needs. Presumably he would have little trouble abandoning the Arab economic boycott or ending hostile propaganda attacks on Israel. How far and how fast he is willing move toward more normal relations with Israel will obviously depend in part on Israel's meeting Arab demands and on how these practical steps would be implemented.

#### Domestic Considerations

The past year has been a difficult one for Asad that has severely tested his domestic political strength. His intervention in Lebanon was neither popular, nor well understood either by his enemies or supporters. It put him at loggerheads with the PLO, antagonized Syria's Sunni Muslim conservatives, and eroded his support among his own minority Alawite sect.

Clandestine terrorist groups, carrying out bombings and assassinations of lower level Alawite officials, apparently continue to elude Asad's security services. Foreign Minister Khaddam was nearly killed by assassins in December, and attempts have been made against other senior Syrian officials.

We do not believe, however, that this dissident activity represents a serious threat to Asad or a constraint on his ability to negotiate, although assassination remains an obvious possibility. None of his enemies, either individually or in any likely combination, appears to have the strength to dislodge Asad. His involvement in the negotiating process may in fact help keep his opponents off-balance.

The armed forces, which are dominated by Alawites remain Asad's main power base and his brother Rifaat's Defense Companies are his most important deterrent against a coup attempt. Although the army's loyalty was strained by Asad's decision to intervene in Lebanon and further shaken by the arrest of several Alawite officers last December for alleged

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coup plotting, Asad appears to have weeded out, or transferred, potential malcontents and mended fences with the most important constituencies in the military.

Asad has also deftly strengthened his hand by a number of foreign policy moves. In addition to ending his feud with Sadat, Asad has continued to promote closer ties with Jordan's King Husayn, reached an understanding of sorts with PLO chief Yasir Arafat, patched up relations with Moscow and even sought--with some apparent success recently--to mute his quarrel with Iraq, the most persistent and troublesome outside subversive threat.

On balance, then, we believe Asad is in a strong position and can--and will--take risks to recover the Golan Heights through negotiations if he believes such risks are warranted. He will continue to play a more cautious, tougher game than Sadat, however, because he can better afford to, and because he remains more pessimistic about prospects for peace.

-6-

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